**ST JOHN THE BAPTIST KINGSTON BAGPUIZE OXFORDSHIRE FESTIVAL 2017**

For 10 days in March 2017, we, the congregation of St John the Baptist in the Oxfordshire parish of Kingston Bagpuize with Southmoor, ran a very successful Festival of some 50 Christian events through which we explicitly shared our faith with our neighbours.

Some 10 miles to the west of Oxford, the parish was originally a small rural one, with life largely revolving around farming. Since the Second World War, the two villages have progressively become a dormitory area for residents working in Oxford and beyond and in recent years have grown substantially. Although the community is very active socially, family and professional focusses are becoming geographically much more widely dispersed, a trend being reinforced by the most recent development plans which will take the 2015 population of 2,500 to 5,000 by 2020.

The Festival was the culminating aspiration of a 5-year Mission Action Plan (MAP) which, building on traditional ways of outreach, proposed an ambitious additional range of church-based activities aimed at developing the spiritual growth of the church community, engaging more directly and intensively with the rapidly increasing local community and bringing non-churchgoers to faith.

 We were very fortunate in our Christian friends, including members of the adjoining parish at Marcham, and a dedicated team of ordinands from Wycliffe Hall. And we were delighted that the evangelist Rico Tice accepted an invitation to head the first weekend’s Festival Launch and that the Bishop of Dorchester, the Rt Revd Colin Fletcher, was willing to lead the culminating weekend’s activities. It was no surprise that both proved to be major attractions. Throughout the Festival Canon Bruce Gillingham joined Vicar David Pickering to inspire and encourage the home team of some two dozen congregation members, for whom the experience was intensive and a challenge well beyond their normal comfort zone.

So, how did we prepare, what happened and what were the outcomes?

Planning started a year in advance, led by the 8-strong Outreach Group and overseen by the Vicar and PCC. Once the broad outlines and links with Wycliffe Hall had been established, prayer, event, catering, hosting and communications teams were identified to take forward detailed preparations, and a programme was progressively developed. This was anchored in the more successful elements of the MAP and aimed to provide something to attract all elements of the community. The detailed programme is attached.

In the final build-up, publicity was a key. Posters sprouted all over the village, the local newspaper made the Festival a major feature, and BBC Radio Oxford obliged by interviewing the Revd Joe Cotterill, who celebrated his 100th birthday on the first day of the Festival and who still leads two services a month when he isn’t visiting family in Arkansas.

The Saturday launch events were a popular “Big Breakfast” in the Village Hall at which Rico Tice gave an inspiring talk, and a Run and Fun Run for some 50 adults and 20 children in the grounds of Kingston Bagpuize House, with the local uniformed youth offering refreshments, and a prize-giving within a Christian talk given in the adjacent St John the Baptist Church by Rico Tice. The day ended with a Christian sports talk by Rico who then spoke at a series of Sunday services, the main one held in the Village Hall to accommodate a much larger congregation. The weekend’s events were rounded off with the church hosting a beer-tasting evening designed to bring in the missing males and listen to Canon Bruce.

During the week each day began with a Festival team prayer meeting, followed by prayer walks and community visiting led by the church’s Children and Families’ Worker, Gary Long, and the Wycliffe team, before a series of coffee mornings, lunches and suppers hosted by church members, with their non-churchgoing friends and neighbours as guests. The church also hosted communal lunches with a Christian focus for village groups, including Mums and Toddlers, the local retirement home, the Southmoor Children’s Centre, and the Age UK- assisted bereavement group, while church home groups invited potential new members, the church-run weekly KBS Café arranged for a Christian testimony to be given and the ladies ran a “Body and Soul” evening. One of the most successful events, attracting a high proportion of males, was a “Christians in Sport” pub quiz, hosted by Canon Andrew Wingfield Digby. At several events personal testimony was given by church members or our friends from Wycliffe Hall.

In parallel, with the enthusiastic support of the primary school’s Head Teacher, church and Wycliffe team members ran an RE week of Christian workshops and church visits for each year group, culminating in a highly rated Christianity and Science lecture for year 6s, given by a church member who is also a member of the Rutherford Laboratory. The children of the church’s Golden Eagles Bible group for 5 to 11-year olds made their own contribution by inviting non-churchgoing friends to join them at their evening meeting.

And so to the final weekend, beginning with the church’s version of Messy Church, the Fun Factor, a half day of activities for families with refreshments and Christian stories. This was followed in the evening by a fascinating Desert Island Discs with Joe and Joyce Cotterill, hosted by Canon Bruce, which explored the couple’s richly Christian experiences from the time they met in a Japanese Second World War prisoner of war camp in China which they shared with Eric Liddell.

Bishop Colin brought the week to a very happy close, speaking at both Sunday services, in the church and Village Hall, and willingly submitting to a lively “Grill the Bishop” question time over a community lunch in the Village Hall.

Was it all worthwhile? In terms of the growth in spiritual confidence of church members the answer is a resounding “yes”. It was a revelation to see so many church members “stepping up to the plate”, shedding their natural English reserve and declaring their belief. St John the Baptist Church is now the stronger for their courage and faith. Post-Festival evangelism courses have added to church membership, and prayer groups and home groups, including those for children, are thriving in consequence.

Church members have also developed an enhanced social awareness. For many years congregation members have led community activities, many of them in the name of the church, including the weekly café, the bereavement group, children’s activities and Open the Book, but the Festival has given others the confidence to take a lead or offer their time and talents. We now have a thriving regular community lunch, have in mind several initiatives with the residential home, have agreed an enhanced programme of Christian activities with the school, the bereavement group has helped Age UK to make a DVD on bereavement and social isolation which is available nation-wide, and congregation members are establishing a local branch of “Helping Hand”, offering lifts, home visits and general support to anyone in need. The next MAP is likely to have an ambitious new set of aspirations, maybe including another Festival once we have caught our breath!

But above all we feel inspired and blessed. God’s guidance, which we have earnestly sought, has been very apparent in all that we done in His name. We trust Him to give us the wisdom, courage and strength to take our witness to a new level and to bring the Good News to many who are unaware or are uncertain. God willing, we will.

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